

In times of crisis, humans often lose their rationality. They look for someone to blame to make themselves feel better. Sometimes it's people from a different culture. Often it's people from a different faith. It's always the outsiders, the others, that become the focal point of the anger of the masses. History records their mistakes and fractured judgements. The witchcraft persecutions of the 15th-17th centuries are just one example of this phenom. The religious fervor of the age combined with a lack of practical knowledge led the outcasts of the era to unfairly condemned until the Scientific Revolution brought a return to rational thought.

Religious fervor is clearly a main cause of the witchcraft persecutions. "The Hammer of Witches" becomes the holy book of witchcraft persecution. Kramer and Sprenger, the Dominican monks, make clear that women are susceptible to Satan's influence as the weaker sex. But what do two Dominican monks know of women and carnal urges? Don't they spend their lives in a monastery having taken vows of celibacy? Far from vaild insight, it is more likely an expression of ignorance or their own sexual frustration (Doc. 6). Of course the pope echoes their concern in his "witch bull". But again, while the papacy has a far from clean moral record in the 15th century, popes are supposed to be celibate. There are certainly no women allowed in the Catholic clergy. And while the Inquisition was often used to targets the Church's perceived enemies, torture rarely reveals truth. (Doc. 8). Yet it would seem this the one thing that the warring branches of Christianity can agree on. Martin Luther lends his support to the idea that Satan is corrupting women (Doc. 9). John Calvin agrees that not only does witchcraft exist, but it can never be defeated so we must remain eternally vigilant (Doc. 12).

Other authority figures make similar mistakes for a variety of reasons. The executioner, Karl Pfefferkorn seems quite confident in the guilt of his victims. Of course, what executioner would open himself to doubt? He is directly responsible for taking numerous lives. He can't be wrong, he has a confession! (Doc. 4). But what are we to make of these confessions? Seka Kisha appears to deliver damning evidence in her "confession". But this confession isn't hers, it's Walpurga Hausmannin's. How does one confess for someone else? Well clearly from the text the horrific torture employed in this case makes a true confession impossible. Who wouldn't agree to anything they were asked in such a painful state (Doc. 7)? Kristina Eissig makes it clear that her confession is nothing more than an escape from pain (Doc. 1). The mayor Barnberg lays out the truth of the matter in his letter to his daughter. He has little reason to mislead us, it's a private letter than he can never expect to see the light of day. He has been tortured to a point that his executioner is so dismayed that he begs him to confess so that both of their pain may stop (Doc 3).

Outcasts were once again the target. The record makes it clear that the victims of the witchcraft persecutions were overwhelmingly female (Doc. 11). This women were often older (Doc 4). They were often in positions of power such as a midwife (Doc. 7). Even some physicians mistook this for the natural conditions of witches (Doc. 2). But as the 17th century opens the truth is uncovered in a more rationale age. Dr. von Steineck realizes that all of the "supernatural" actions of these poor women are explainable natural causes. Satan doesn't destroy crops and livestock, disease does. Of course,

the good doctor is writing in 1699, the height of the Scientific Revolution. He would never accept the baseless allegations of the Inquisition without hard evidence and proof (Doc. 10). But even reason and proof are not always a sufficient defense. Peter Meyer, the Chief Justice is writing in 1682 and sees the error of his community's ways. His logic is overwhelmed by the mob, he fears for his life if he dares to contradict them. (Doc. 5).

Today we live in an age of fear. Terrorists want to destroy our way of life. People of different faiths want to kill us for worshipping a different god. Inconvenient facts are "fake news". But haven't we seen this before? The Holocaust? The Terror? The witchcraft persecutions? History teaches us that these times inevitably appear due to the frailty of humanity. History also gives us hope, because it also teaches us that these times shall pass, hopefully with fewer innocent victims of our uncertainty and fear.